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UK government should fund stop smoking media campaigns not give tax breaks to films with smoking imagery.

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Although smoking rates in both children (1) and adults (2) in the UK have fallen significantly in recent decades, every day hundreds of children still take up the habit(3). Many of these will be embarking on a lifelong addiction which kills nearly 100,000 people in the UK each year, more than the next six causes of preventable premature death put together.(4)

The UK government has signalled its ambition to achieve a 'smoke-free generation'(5) and committed to publishing a new tobacco strategy, 'led by the evidence' this summer.(6) However, such a strategy cannot be successful unless it is also *funded* according to the evidence. Unfortunately, spending on public health has been substantially reduced in recent years and in particular on anti-tobacco media campaigns. These, when adequately funded,

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both help smokers to quit and discourage youth uptake.(7) In 2009-10, funding for anti-smoking mass media campaigns in England was just under £25 million: by 2015 this figure had been cut to only £5.3 million(8), with further cuts expected this year (Figure 1). If England were to fund mass media campaigns at internationally recommended levels(9) it should be spending around £60 million; more than ten times the amount spent in 2015.

Early indications are that funding cuts in mass media spend and public health budgets are already threatening to halt or reverse long-term falls in smoking prevalence. The latest data suggest that smoking prevalence has already stopped declining in England; prior to 2015 the average annual decrease over the previous 7 years was 0.8 percentage points per annum.(10)

Advertising or promotion of tobacco products in the UK is now prohibited, including displays in shops and, most recently, standardised 'plain' packaging legislation will prohibit the tobacco industry from using the pack as a promotional tool. However, there remains one potent form of smoking promotion which the UK government helps fund. Exposure to smoking imagery in films is associated with increased risk of smoking uptake, and a recent systematic review and meta-analysis in *Addiction* validated the likelihood that tobacco imagery in films is a major driver of smoking uptake.(11) Based on methodology described here (12), between 2007 and 2015 UK Film Tax Relief provided subsidies worth an estimated £473 million to at least 90 top-grossing UK or US-UK films with tobacco imagery, with 97% of this granted to films which are youth-rated in the UK.

Until recently, studies tracking smoking in movies over time suggested levels were falling, albeit slowly, but more recently there has been a rebound. A recent example is the film *Absolutely Fabulous* launched in the UK on July 1st. The film itself is rated 15 but its trailers, rated U and PG, contain numerous scenes of characters smoking. This represents a significant source of exposure to children, during the years in which the risk of smoking uptake is highest. (1-3)

While the last government tobacco strategy acknowledged the harm caused by such exposure and committed to tackle this problem, in practice little has been achieved.(13) Recommendations by WHO that films with scenes of smoking should be given an adult content rating have to date been ignored by the UK government, as have suggestions that the producers of such films should not receive tax credits.

It is unacceptable for the government to sustain or increase tax credit subsidies for films containing smoking, while cutting its spend on mass media anti-smoking campaigns - spend which not only could help to reduce smoking initiation but also counter the impact of smoking in films.(11) If the new government strategy currently eagerly awaited by the public health community is to succeed it must include evidence-based funding for mass

media campaigns and a renewed commitment to ‘work to reduce the depiction of smoking in the media’.(13)

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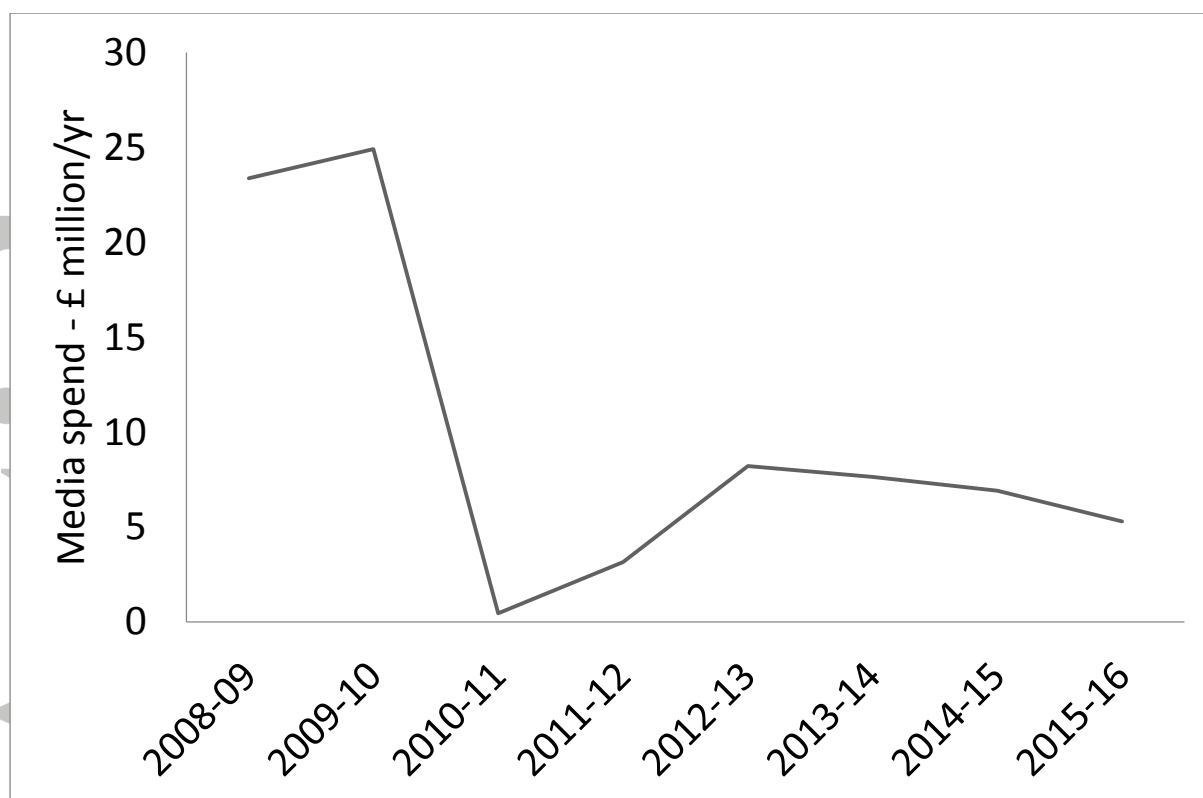


Figure 1

Government media spending on smoking cessation in England per financial year(8).